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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABIDJAN 000134

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SUBJECT: COTE D'IVOIRE'S TRANSITION: STRUGGLING TO GET OFF THE GROUND

REF: A) ABIDJAN 44 B) 2005 ABIDJAN 2071 C) 2005 ABIDJAN 2079 D) ABIDJAN 112

Classified By: Poloff Phaedra Gwyn for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. The October 6 decision by the African Union (AU) that President Gbagbo should remain as head of state and a new Prime Minister be appointed to bring the country to disarmament and elections has failed to generate the hoped-for momentum among the Ivoirian actors. The peace process remains chilled if not frozen. Since the new Cabinet was announced on December 28, it has barely met and achieved little of substance. President Gbagbo continues his maneuvering to undermine the Prime Minister's authority, just as he did with Banny's predecessor. During the January 16-20 street demonstrations (ref A), Gbagbo demonstrated how easily he could trump the two most important cards in Banny's deck: control over the Defense and Security forces (FDS) and Ivoirian Radio and Television (RTI). Banny has yet to prove he can play his third important card, the Treasury. The previous Finance Minister, a key Gbagbo supporter, refuses to vacate his office. Banny's credibility has suffered, tensions and intimidation in the south are gradually increasing, and it is unlikely that presidential elections will be held by October 2006 as scheduled. End summary.

CLIMATE OF INTIMIDATION

¶2. (C) Banny's efforts to organize elections, disarm the rebels, and dismantle the militias take place within a climate characterized by fear and intimidation. The January 16-20 street violence in Abidjan and western Cote d'Ivoire by the Young Patriots, with complicity from the FDS, showed that Gbagbo remains in control. The FDS ignored Banny's authority and he even had to go into hiding for a period. And the Defense Minister, according to Banny, was practically held against his will for several hours by members of the FDS. In the western town of Guiglo, which is nominally under military rule, Young Patriots chased away a UN Bangladeshi battalion and UN humanitarian agencies and carried out extensive looting, including of military materiel and ordnance and of 7,000 tons of rice from the World Food Program.

¶3. (C) In Abidjan, as has become their wont during periods of unrest, Gbagbo supporters took over state-owned RTI (broadcast authority), delivering a very public blow to Banny's authority. Serges Koffi, the president of the thuggish, pro-Gbagbo student union, FESCI, who led the takeover, told us later that his actions were justified because RTI was not covering the protests. He also warned ominously that Yacouba Kebe, the Director General of RTI, should be more careful in the future. Koffi's threats and those of other Gbagbo supporters suggest increasing boldness on their part in attempting to intimidate the opposition. Should the Young Patriots take to the streets again, their actions will not only raise tensions and undermine the peace

process and the prospects for elections by October, they will also further weaken the economy. During the January protests, Ivoirian businessmen, particularly transporters and petty traders, suffered millions of dollars in losses. More violence will sap business confidence and exacerbate unemployment.

BUT THE (NON) GOVERNING CONTINUES

¶4. (C) There is no sign that the government is seized with accomplishing its urgent mission. Banny's first two priorities should be Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) of former combatants and organizing elections. However, Banny did not even look at the DDR timetable prepared by the International Working Group (IWG) until January 12, over a month after taking up his post. And when UN High Representative for Elections Monteiro met with Banny to consult on how to break the deadlock in the Independent Electoral Commission, Banny made clear, according to UN sources, that this was Monteiro's problem to solve. Nothing substantive has emerged from the few cabinet meetings that have been held. According to Minister Mabri (Integration and Regional Cooperation), Banny has yet to create a team spirit or to mobilize ministers to work together. Five ministers were absent from the last meeting, and though rebel leader Guillaume Soro was promoted to the second-ranking minister in the cabinet, he remains in the north. Banny has yet to release a budget for 2006, the country remains in non-accrual status with the World Bank (which is supposed to be a major source of financing for DDR) and international donors are unlikely to come forward to help finance elections in light of the lack of progress.

ABIDJAN 00000134 002 OF 002

¶5. Gbagbo has outmaneuvered Banny and the international community by invoking emergency powers to extend the mandate of the National Assembly, in which Gbagbo holds an effective majority. His unilateral action is a slap in the face of the UN, the International Working Group, and Banny. Banny has made no comment about Gbagbo's decree and has essentially acted as though nothing had happened.

SNATCHING DEFEAT FROM THE JAWS OF VICTORY

¶6. (C) Banny in short showed promise in forming his team in a reasonable period of time, but disappointment is replacing promise as he falls short of effectively governing. Banny seeks to avoid confrontation to the point of failing to assert himself. We find it surprising that he can state, and perhaps believe, that the January violence did not undermine his authority. With fewer than nine months to go before presidential elections, each participant in the political process ought to be working urgently to prepare for them, but the opposite is happening. Banny himself, instead of working to shore up his support at home, spent the early part of this week on a trip to South Africa and later in Republic of the Congo meeting with new AU chairman Sassou-Nguesso. (Congolese Foreign Minister Adada is expected in Abidjan later this week, suggesting that the Congolese, having assumed the AU chairmanship, now want to become involved in the peace process here.) The DDR Commission, attached to the Prime Minister's office, appears dormant. Cabinet meetings have been few and unproductive, and there is no sign that the ministries have accomplished much individually either, especially on the key issues of identification and voter registration, and redeployment of the civil service to the north. Banny is dealing with a weak hand and it looks increasingly unlikely that he will be able to meet the key objectives of his government, most importantly elections.

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